

1996

# Deconstruction, existentialism, and art

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**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**DECONSTRUCTION, EXISTENTIALISM, AND ART**

**by**

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**April, 1996**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

My thesis is about deconstruction of existentialism through visual images, or more precisely, deconstructive visual representations of existential themes.

The question of human existence has been a primal interest in my work. What is the meaning of existence? How can I make sense of man's unique intellectual capacity to question one's own existence? My concern is not so much about coming up with the answer, but to have a language to disclose the condition. In the past, my work was merely the ambiguous expression of the existential feeling without any particular conceptual foundation. My work is now a manifestation of confrontation with the very awareness of existence.

In this thesis project, my intention is to explore a more analytical approach to the representation of the subject, by applying the deconstructionist principle to the conception of my work. The objective of incorporating deconstructive thinking is to examine the nature of the relationship between the images and their meanings, and to investigate how the works of art construct and represent their overall concepts. In doing so, I intend to provide sufficient information on the deconstructionist practice, the existentialist concerns, and their relations to my work.

## CHAPTER 2

### DECONSTRUCTION AND ART

Deconstruction was originated by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s. Originally it was practiced in philosophical writings and literary criticisms. However, since then, the practice has spread to the fields of social sciences, architecture, and the visual arts. Nowadays it is a broadly used (and misused) term and, in some cases, it has little to do with the original philosophical idea. Although its influence on the current postmodern culture cannot be denied, there is a certain degree of skepticism about its real significance.

Commonly, deconstruction seems to be misunderstood by the general public because its identity is rather intangible and obscured. Part of the reason for this is caused by Derrida himself, who refuses to define what deconstruction is. In the interview with Christopher Norris, Derrida states:

Since it is not a system, not a method, it cannot be homogenised. Since it takes the singularity of every context into account, Deconstruction is different from one context to another. So I should certainly want to reject the idea that 'Deconstruction' denotes any theory, method or univocal concept.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Jacques Derrida: In Discussion with Christopher Norris," interview by Christopher Norris, in Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume, ed. Andreas Papadakis, Catherine Cooke, and Andrew Benjamin (London: Academy Editions, 1989), 73.

This does not mean that deconstruction is unknowable. Norris summarizes the deconstructionist activity as follows:

Deconstruction locates certain crucial oppositions or binary structures of meaning and value that constitute the discourse of 'Western metaphysics'. These include (among many others) the distinctions between form and content, nature and culture, thought and perception, essence and accident, mind and body, theory and practice, male and female, concept and metaphor, speech and writing etc. A Deconstructive reading then goes on to show how these terms are inscribed within a systematic structure of hierarchical privilege, such that one of each pair will always appear to occupy the sovereign or governing position. The aim is then to demonstrate - by way of close reading - how this system is undone, so to speak, from within; how the second or subordinate term in each pair has an equal (maybe a prior) claim to be treated as a *condition of possibility* for the entire system. Thus writing is regularly marginalised, denounced or put in its place - a strictly secondaly, 'supplementary' place - by a long line of thinkers in the Western tradition, from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau, Husserl, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and the latter-day structuralist human sciences.<sup>2</sup>

This type of thinking certainly seems to have an affinity with the postmodern art world. However, can deconstruction really be applied to the visual arts? Since the deconstructionist practice is heavily rooted in the questioning of linguistic structure and reading of texts, its application to the visual arts seems absurd. Here is Derrida's response:

[T]he most effective deconstruction, and I have said this often, is one that deals with the nondiscursive, or with discursive institutions that don't have the form of a written discourse. . . . Now, because there cannot be anything, and in particular any art, that isn't textualized in the sense I give to the word "text" - which goes beyond the purely discursive - there is text as soon as deconstruction is engaged in fields said to be artistic, visual or spatial. There is text because there is always a little discourse somewhere in the visual arts, and also because even if there is no

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<sup>2</sup>Christopher Norris, Introduction to "Jacques Derrida: In Discussion with Christopher Norris," in Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume, 71.



discourse, the effect of spacing already implies a textualization. . . . Deconstruction starts with the deconstruction of logocentrism, and thus to want to confine it to linguistic phenomena is the most suspect of operations.<sup>3</sup>

So deconstruction can surely take place in the field of visual arts. However, how can deconstructive art be visually recognized? The word deconstruction has been used by critics to describe the works of such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, and Francis Bacon.<sup>4</sup> Some artists such as Francis Bacon, Valerio Adami, and Gérard Titus-Carmel have talked of Derrida's influence on their works. Yet the distinction between deconstructive art and many of the other modern and postmodern arts remains unclear.<sup>5</sup>

Andrew Benjamin explains this difficulty in specifying a particular work of art as an instance of deconstruction:

Part of the difficulty with this is trying to locate Deconstruction in an object. . . . The question of the object returns in another way and it goes back to the point put to Derrida as to whether or not Deconstruction is something that comes to be enacted within an object or is a way of reading objects or a way of reading texts. As is always the case with these things, it's clearly both; the question of enactment is problematic.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Jacques Derrida, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," interview by Peter Brunette and David Wills, trans. Laurie Volpe, in Deconstruction and the Visual Arts, ed. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14-15.

<sup>4</sup>Norris, 71.

<sup>5</sup>David Lodge, "Deconstruction: A Review of the Tate Gallery Symposium," in Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume, 89-90.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Benjamin, "Discussion and Comments," discussion with Stephen Bann et al., in Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume, 76.

Geoff Bennington puts it this way, "Deconstruction is not in objects. . . . [O]bjects are in Deconstruction."<sup>7</sup>

There is another reason why it is difficult to identify deconstruction in art. Deconstruction is certainly rebellious against traditional philosophical thinking. Such a frame of mind is very similar to the attitudes of many contemporary artists who continuously question the value of established styles and concepts. That explains why, in art, deconstruction does not appear to be anything distinctively different visually. Here is Bennington again:

[T]he most traditional philosophical views of art as *mimesis*, and its most academic practice, have always necessarily left uneasily open a sense of art as a dangerous event in which something happens to disturb the integrity of 'nature herself' (and not just respond to her), somewhere resisting the grasp of concept and commentary, and through the insufficiency of attempted explanations of this event in terms of talent, inspiration or genius, something of this deconstructive edge or 'point', as Derrida says, has always been at work. To this extent, art has always already been in excess of its concepts, already deconstructive . . . [Deconstruction] is in any case a provisional and necessarily improper name for the movement one of whose traditional names has been 'art'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Geoff Bennington, "Discussion and Comments," discussion with Stephen Bann et al., in Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume, 77.

<sup>8</sup>Geoff Bennington, "Deconstruction and Postmodernism," in Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume, 87.

## CHAPTER 3

### EXISTENTIALISM AND ART

The question of human existence is the main theme in my work. It seems inevitable for human beings to face this question. Why do we exist? The question of existence is disturbing and unsettling. We cannot help but feel anguished because we are conscious beings.

The philosophy of existentialism offers a very clear view of what the state of human reality is. The principle of existentialism is that, in the case of human beings, existence precedes essence. In other words, you have to start with subjectivity. We exist first, and then, we become something afterward. There is no predetermined human nature.<sup>9</sup> In the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.”<sup>10</sup> Human beings are free to choose any actions. Consequently, each individual is totally responsible for his/her own actions.<sup>11</sup>

Some of my works are simply expressions of various existential feelings. They are more or less intuitively conceived images rather than deeply analytical, yet, a

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<sup>9</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism,” trans. Bernard Frechtman, in Essays in Existentialism, with a foreword and edited by Wade Baskin (New York: A Citadel Press Book, 1993), 35-36.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 41.

particular existential issue underlies each work. For instance, Existence (fig.1) is about the contingency of human existence in this world. It represents a man's accidental appearance and disappearance in a certain space and time. What lies in between his birth and death is only his freedom of choice in life.

Consciousness (fig.2) is about the nothingness of being. The face in the center symbolizes a man's reflective consciousness and his realization of self. At the same time, it is the realization of the emptiness of being as well. So the vast empty space is actually the reflection of himself. In Sartre's thought, the concept of nothingness is deeply related to that of being. To understand this, first, you need to understand the nature of consciousness. Arthur C. Danto explains:

The primary structure of consciousness, the absolute beginning point, as much for Sartre as for the entire phenomenological school, is that consciousness always is *of* something. It is not, so to speak, a pure state, and no one is merely conscious without there being something of which he is conscious.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, since consciousness is invariably conscious of something external, consciousness itself is a sort of nothingness.<sup>13</sup> In other words, as Sartre writes, "Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being - like a worm."<sup>14</sup>

Gaze (fig.3) is about an ontological conflict between individuals. It depicts the mental torment caused by the presence of another consciousness. Sartre points out two

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<sup>12</sup>Arthur C. Danto, "Nothingness: or, Consciousness and Ontology," in Jean-Paul Sartre (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 43.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>14</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Problem of Nothingness," trans. Hazel E. Barnes, in Essays in Existentialism, 107.

basic types of being. The being-for-itself is the type of being which possesses its own consciousness, such as a human being. The being-in-itself is the one which exists without consciousness of its own, such as an object. And the being-for-itself can turn into another type of being, which is called the being-for-others.<sup>15</sup> What turns a being-for-itself to a being-for-others is the gaze of another human being. The look of another human being makes an individual perceive him/herself as “a possible object for that look”.<sup>16</sup> So, in the work Gaze, the face which appears on the surface of the eye is actually the reflection of the being who is reduced to the state of an object by the look. The work portrays the loss of his sense of freedom, and the ontological problem of others.

All three of these works consist of the combination of representational and abstract elements. The most visually intelligible element through these works is the image of a face. Certainly it is accessible to viewers because the image is easily recognizable and it has a certain undisguised symbolic quality. It clearly symbolizes the awareness of existential problems. Even though the image of a face can evoke a strong emotional response to which a viewer can possibly relate, the conceptual under current of each work is not so obvious. Therefore it becomes necessary for the viewer to interpret the abstract symbols and the other implications in the works to fully perceive their whole concepts.

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<sup>15</sup>Danto, 41-42.

<sup>16</sup>Arthur C. Danto, “Shame: or, the Problem of Other Minds,” in Jean-Paul Sartre, 121.

## CHAPTER 4

### WORKS IN DECONSTRUCTION

One obvious binary relationship which occurs in art is that of image and meaning. It is a system of signs which is of a social, cultural, or individual creation. Since artists freely combine various visual images from a social icon to a personal symbol in their works, how a work of art represents its concept varies from one to another. The meaning of a certain image is not fixed but also changes according to its context. Therefore, how a work of art is perceived depends heavily upon each individual's knowledge of the work and how he/she interprets the visual images. This does not mean that a work of art is all visual images with hidden meanings. The issue of title brings up an interesting aspect in art.

The title of a work occupies an ambiguous position in art. It is not a part of the represented image, yet it is not completely outside of the work either. What it does is to create a certain condition for the work to be seen in a certain way. In some of my works, the titles play a very significant role.

Purpose (fig.4) can be described as the work which questions the existential concept of the purpose of being by questioning the purpose of the art object itself. In other words, the image has no logical relation to its title. So the aim of the work is to raise the question: "Why is this work called Purpose?". Even though the relationship

between the image and its title or meaning is completely arbitrary, the bullet shaped bronze piece and its reflective glass base are meant to be perceived as something meaningful. Certainly, this image has an undeniable serene quality of a meditative or an absolute state. What the whole work ultimately implies is the purposelessness of human existence in its very essence.

Certainty (fig.5) uses a play of contradiction to originate the question about the concept of certainty. The broken circle acts as a contradictory image to its title Certainty. There is nothing certain about the broken circle because of its incompleteness. So what is certainty? How can we be certain about anything after all? The concept of certainty is a man made abstract concept which comes with the problem of language. The work questions how uncertain certainty is and the certainty of what we think of human reality.

Freedom (fig.6) is about the freedom of man. The existential concept of human freedom reveals the paradoxical aspect of human condition. Sartre writes:

[M]an is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respect is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, human beings cannot escape from their own freedom. The chained steel rings and their cold heavy property of the material symbolize this heavy human condition of being bound to one's own freedom. The image of the work is certainly a

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<sup>17</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism," trans. Bernard Frechtman, in Essays in Existentialism, 41.

contrast to the ordinary concept of the term freedom. Therefore, the work forces a viewer to face these two seemingly contrary views and, as a result, to question the concept of human freedom at its very core.

All three of these works explore the relationships between the images and their meanings in their own unique ways. The overall concept of each work only comes into existence within the perceptible difference between the represented object and its meaning implied by the title. However, these works cannot escape from the polysemous nature of signs after all, no matter how clearly they are titled or how obviously they are represented. In the end, everything seems to be same as it was. The works of art remain silent and ambiguous.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In the past few years, it seems that, consciously or unconsciously, my struggle as an artist was to attain a certain clarity in my work. I seemed to believe that the idea of a work could be manifested clearly in a visual image or an art object. As a result, I could not help facing a sort of dilemma between my concept of what art can be and the way art is. Even though there seems to exist an illusion of art as an intelligible substance because of its visual status, it is not quite so, as Peter Brunette and David Wills correctly point out, “Artistic expression is never the unmediated manifestation of emotion that it wants to pretend it is.”<sup>18</sup>

So it goes back to the very basic question of what art is. More than anything, what I discovered, or rather rediscovered, through this thesis project is that the nature of art is a heuristic medium. Since art can never escape from the system of signs, works of art always come with some ambiguity. This ambiguity is precisely what gives a sense of mystery to a work of art. And the mystery is probably necessary for art, in order to transcend its maker and its mere objectness.

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<sup>18</sup>Peter Brunette and David Wills, “Introduction,” in Deconstruction and the Visual Arts, 4.

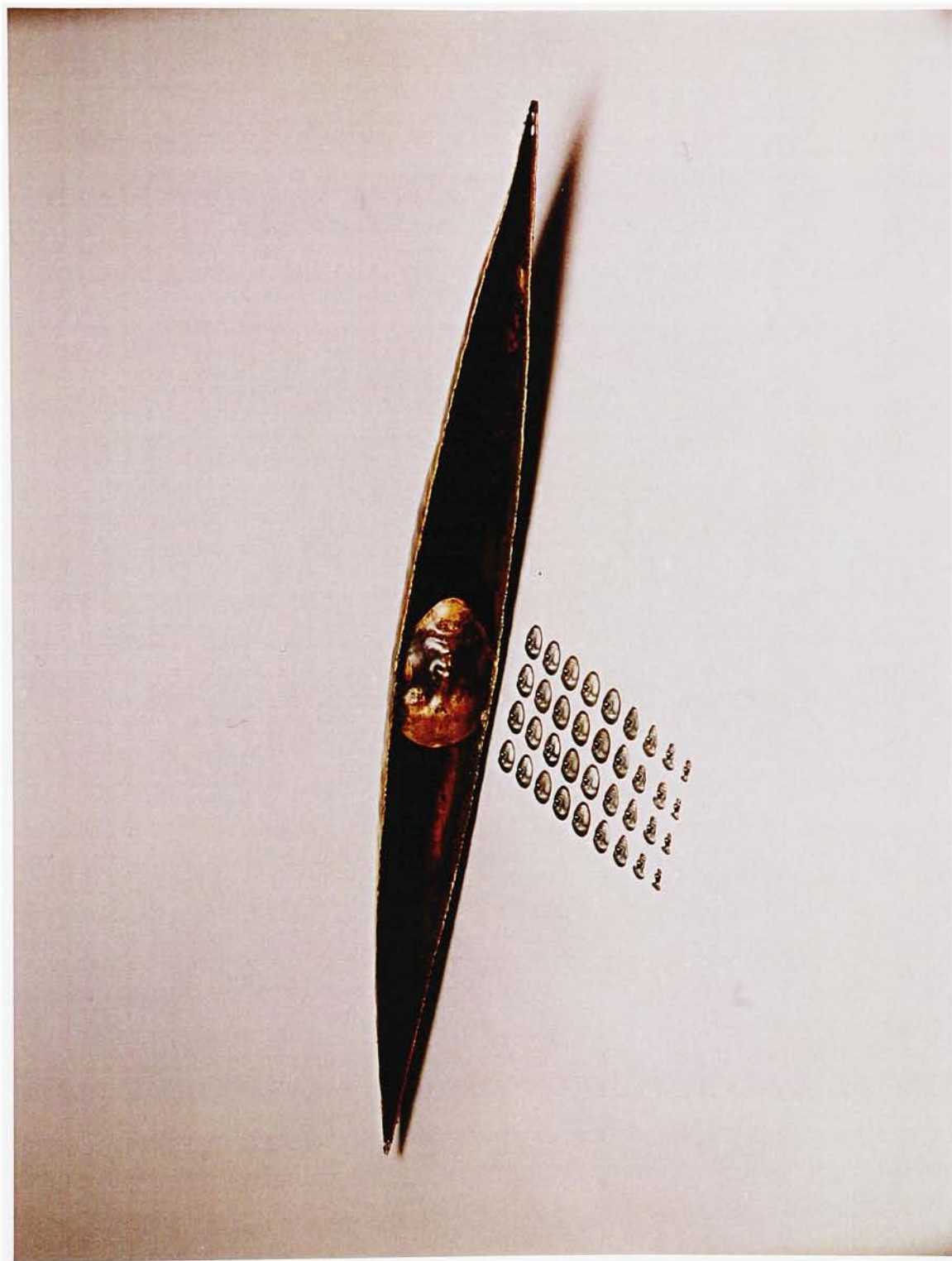


Fig. 1. Existence: Copper and Bronze, 71"x36"x7½"

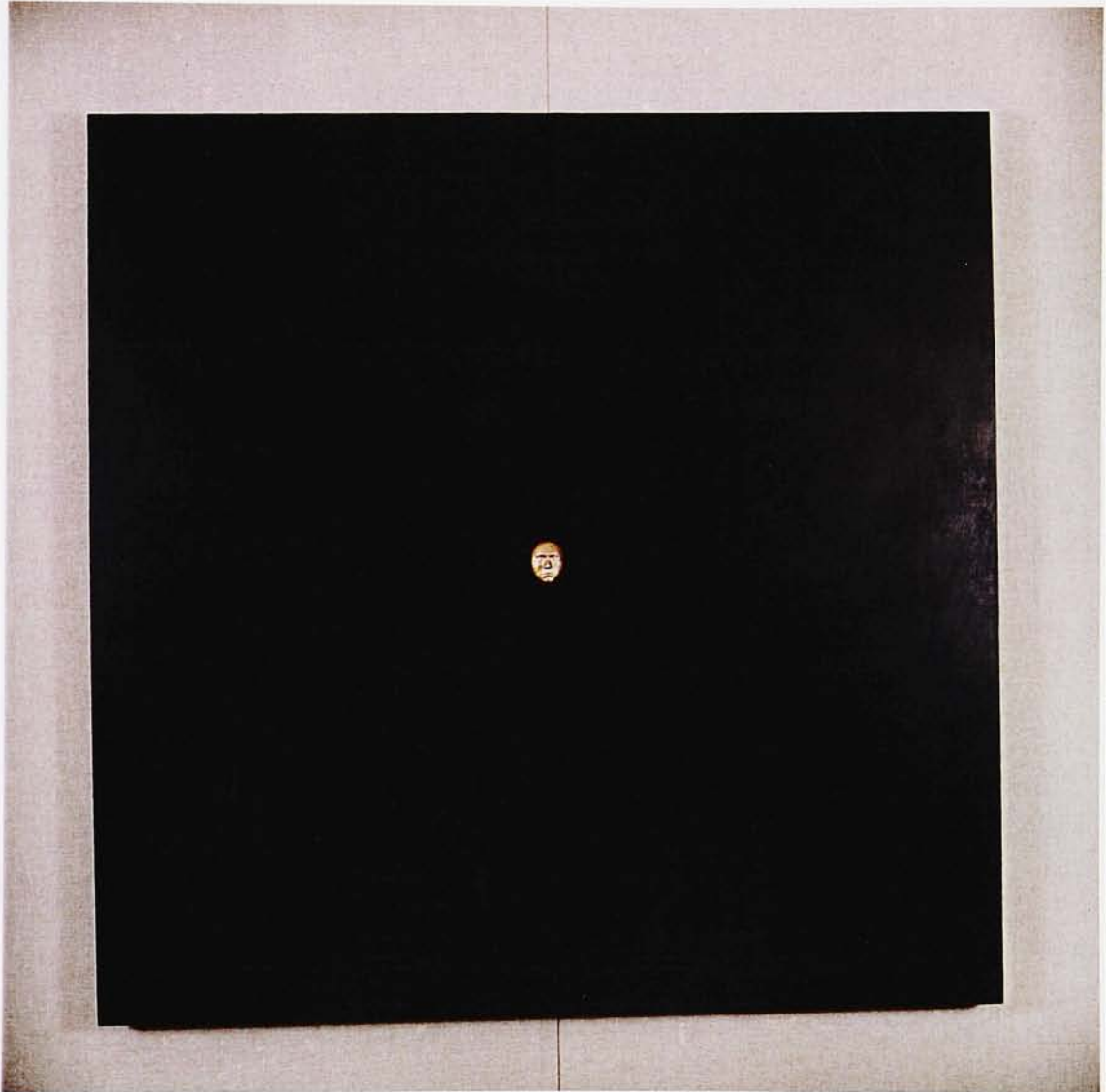


Fig. 2. Consciousness: Bronze, Plywood, and Acrylic Paint, 48"x48"x3"

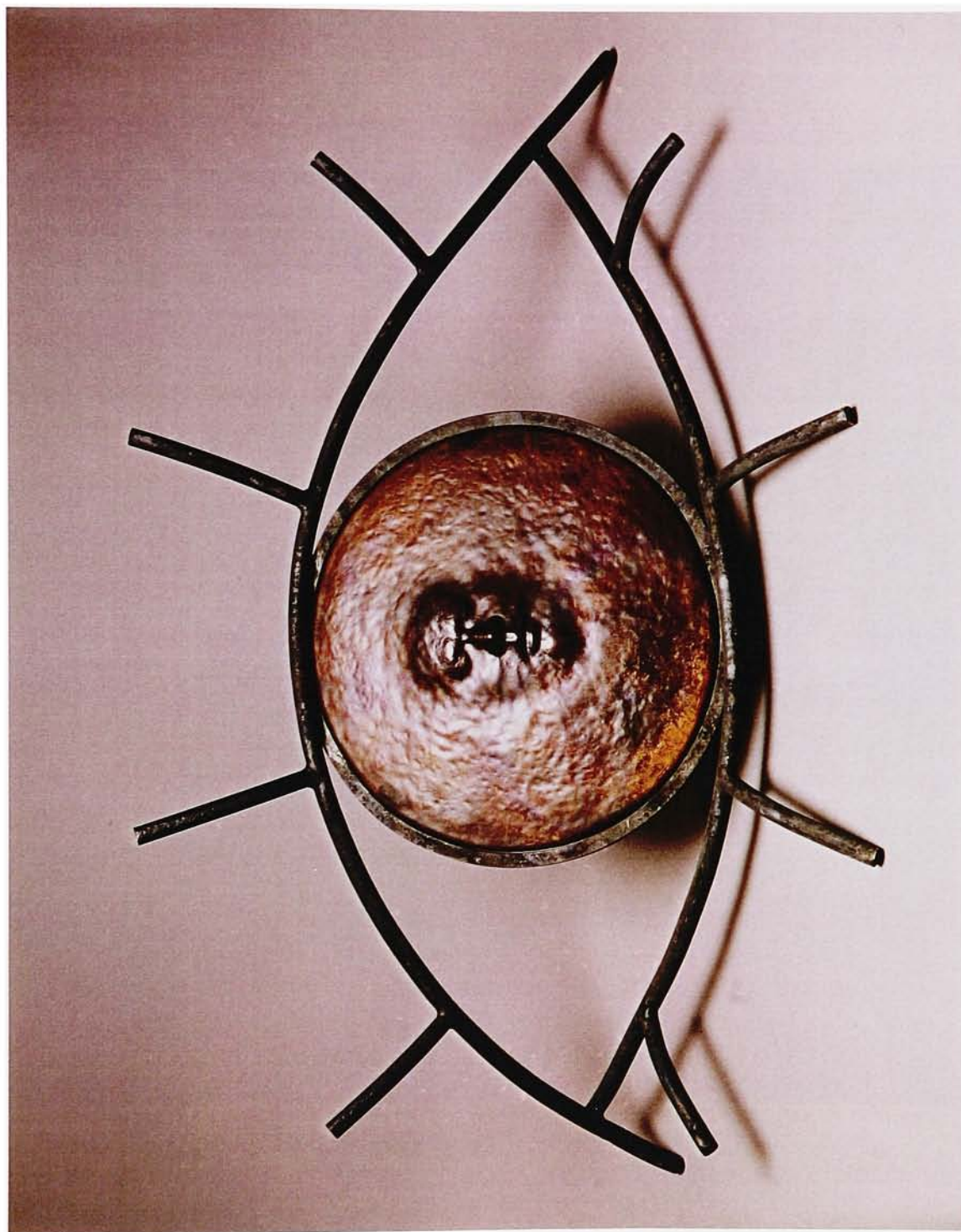


Fig. 3. Gaze: Copper and Steel, 33"x84"x39"

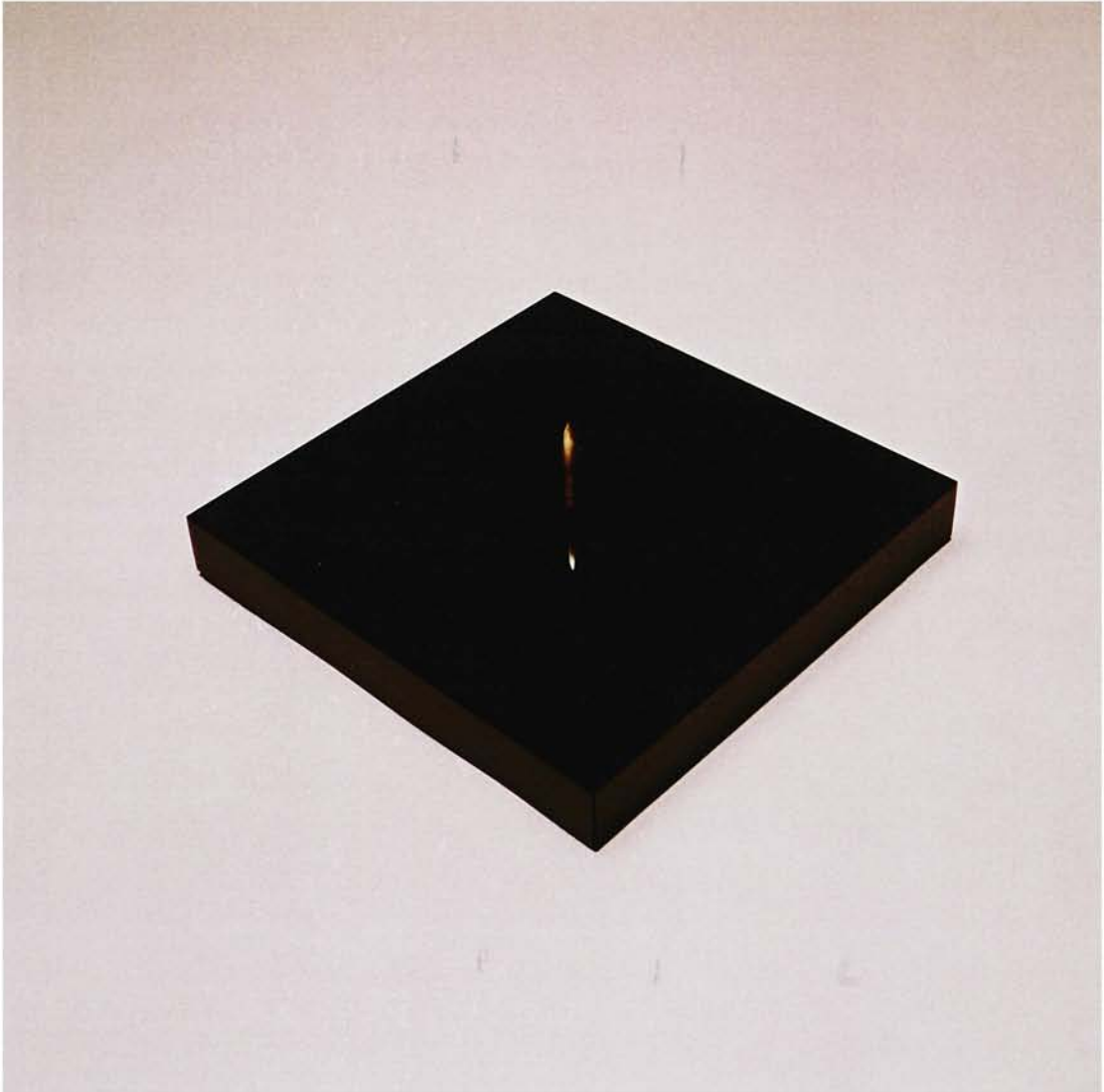


Fig. 4. Purpose: Bronze and Glass,  $3\frac{1}{2}$ "x12"x12"



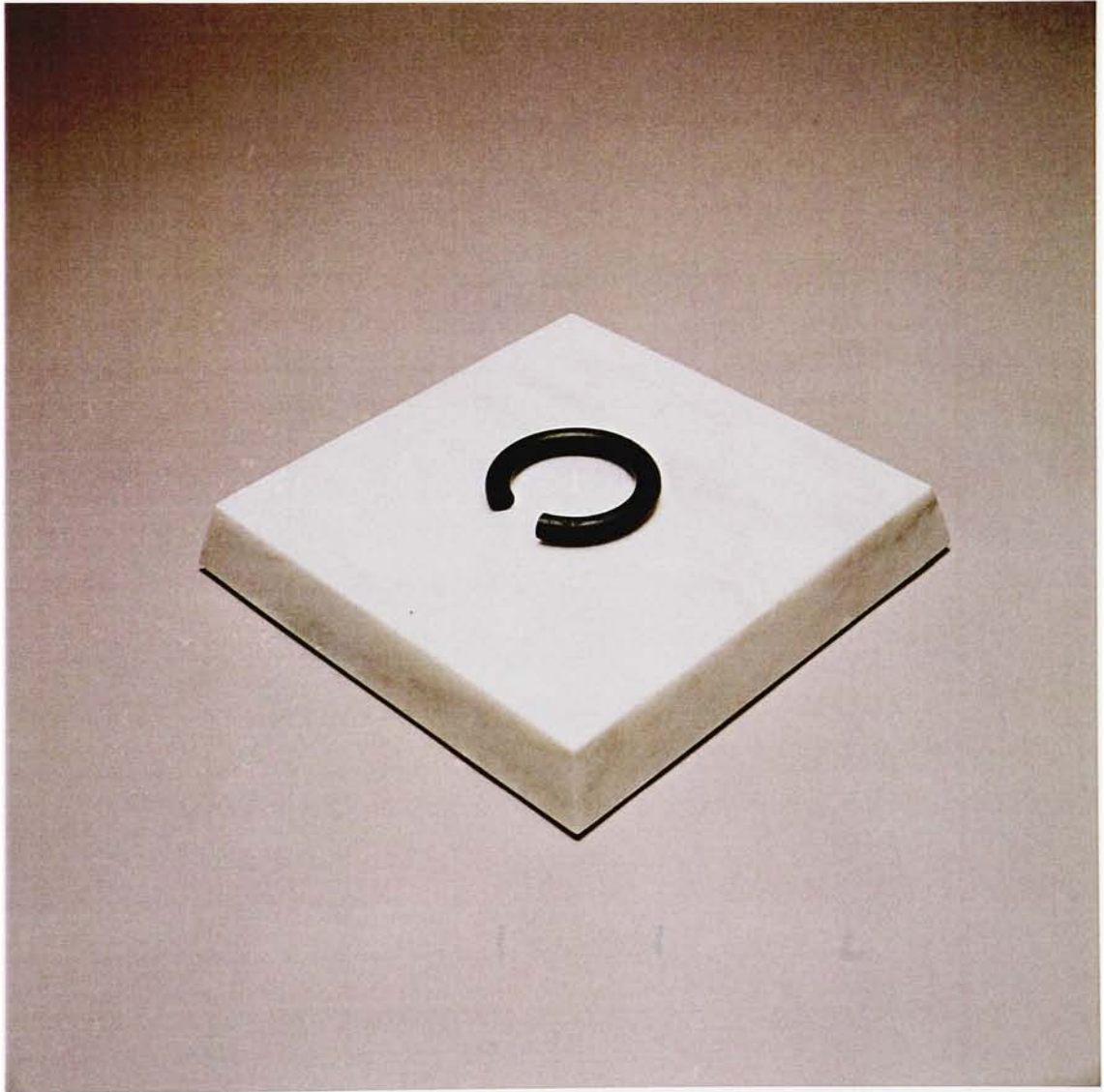


Fig. 5. Certainty: Steel, Marble, and Paint, 2-5/8"x13"x13"



Fig. 6. Freedom: Thirteen 18" diameter steel rings

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